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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
ASSISTANT SECRETARY

2582

SECRET

FEB 15 1964

TO : The Secretary
THROUGH : S/S ~~SOB~~
FROM : FE - Roger Hilsman
SUBJECT : Laos

The Pathet Lao--unquestionably supported by North Vietnamese forces--have recently made new advances in central Laos. They have forced the neutralist and conservative forces off the strategic Na Kay Plateau, which is an important link in the routes southward towards Viet-Nam, and moved to within 15 miles of the Mekong River port of Thakhek. They can take Thakhek at will.

Although the Pathet Lao actions began as a response to moves initiated by Phoumi, they have gone well beyond the level of activity that had been tacitly accepted as permissible under the umbrella of the Geneva Accords. At the very least, these actions are a probe designed to see how far the Geneva framework can be warped in favor of further Communist encroachment. They have been accompanied by a substantial increase in Viet Minh presence and Communist capabilities in the Plaine des Jarres area as well. If we fail to react, the Communists are likely to use this improved military capability with increasing aggressiveness in ways which must damage our position not only in Laos but in South Viet-Nam.

We should not view an increased level of Communist activity in Laos as an isolated phenomenon. The Communist side almost certainly views the situation in all of Southeast Asia as one of change and opportunity. From the Communist point of view the Free World position is in disarray: Recurring coups in South Viet-Nam and American admissions that the military situation there is not good; continued speculation in the Western press about

State Department review completed

neutralist

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neutralist solutions for the area, which has received impetus from General de Gaulle's formulas for ending hostilities in the area; and apparent US indecision on how to respond to Prince Sihanouk's efforts to obtain guarantees of Cambodian neutrality by threatening to turn to Communist China. All of those who today seek to reduce or eliminate the US position in Southeast Asia--the Communist Chinese, the French, the North Vietnamese, the Cambodians--appear to have one view in common: the United States is either unable or unwilling to exert its vast power effectively to defend its positions in Southeast Asia. And in this, the Communists may see an opportunity for decisive action.

For all these reasons, we must, in my judgment, respond promptly and firmly to Communist initiatives in central Laos. We should consider encouraging further Thai reinforcements along the Mekong backed up by visible preparations to introduce US Marine landing battalions and air elements into Thailand.

I request that you authorize me to undertake an appropriate interagency discussion for such a course of action on an urgent contingency basis.

Approve RP

Disapprove _____

Copy to M - Governor Harriman

FE:RHilsman:
FE:JWNeubert:hst
2-15-64

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Executive Registry

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
ASSISTANT SECRETARY

SECRET

February 15, 1964.

TO : ✓Mr. Forrestal
Mr. Colby
General Anthis
Mr. Solbert
Roger Hilsman
FROM : FE - Roger Hilsman
SUBJECT : Attached Memorandum on Laos

I would appreciate if you could attend a meeting in my office Monday at 11:00 to consider the above subject.

FE:RHilsman:hst

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SECRET ATTACHMENT

*or file
Noted by DDCI*

TO : Mr. McCone

FROM : FE - Roger Hilsman *RW* *W*

For your information.

SECRET ATTACHMENT